

Proposed Retirement of A-10 Aircraft: Background in Brief

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Contents

Introduction	1
Background	1
A-10 Retirement/Replacement Plans	1
Current Proposal.....	2
FY2015 Legislation	3
Authorization.....	3
Appropriations.....	4

Tables

Table 1. Close Air Support Missions in Iraq and Afghanistan (2006 - October 2013).....	3
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Contacts

Author Information.....	4
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Introduction

The Administration's fiscal 2015 budget proposed to retire the entire fleet of A-10 Thunderbolt II attack aircraft beginning in FY2016. This report covers the background to that decision and legislative action as of the end of 2014.

Background

The A-10 was designed in the 1970s to perform air interdiction, battlefield air interdiction, and close air support.¹ It was principally designed to attack large masses of Soviet tanks and other armored vehicles. From 1975 to 1984, the Air Force acquired 713 A-10 aircraft.² Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the A-10 was refocused on the close air support role.

As of November 2013, 289 A-10s remained in the force, of which 160 were in the active Air Force, 27 in the Air Force Reserve, and 102 in the Air National Guard.³ Subsequent reporting indicates the number has now reached 283, although CRS does not yet have data showing the distribution of those aircraft among components.⁴ Therefore, 430 A-10s have been retired, lost, or stricken from the rolls due to damage.⁵ This includes all of the early A-10A models; the current Air Force inventory is entirely improved A-10Cs.

A-10 Retirement/Replacement Plans

The Air Force considered retiring the A-10 as early as 1984, shortly after production was completed.

The Air Force ... is concerned that the A-10 will not survive the Soviet air defense threat projected for the 1990s. Thus, in 1984 it began to evaluate aircraft options to the A-10 that would improve the Air Force's ability to support future ground operations. In December

¹ Air interdiction is defined as "air operations conducted to destroy, neutralize, or delay the enemy's military potential before it can be brought to bear effectively against friendly forces at such distance from friendly forces that detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of friendly forces is not required." *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02, 8 November 2010. In the case of the A-10, this meant optimizing the aircraft to attack the waves of Soviet armored vehicles then massed in Europe. Battlefield air interdiction, a phrase no longer in use in joint operations, was defined as "air interdiction attacks against land force targets which have near-term effect on the operations or scheme of maneuver of friendly forces, but are not in close proximity to friendly forces." Joint Pub 1, cited in Richard P. Hallion, "Battlefield Air Support: A Retrospective Assessment," *Airpower Journal*, Spring 1990. Close air support is defined later in this report.

² U.S. General Accounting Office (now called U.S. Government Accountability Office), *Close Air Support: Status of the Air Force's Efforts to Replace the A-10 Aircraft*, NSIAD-88-211, September 1988, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/150/146941.pdf>.

³ James Hackett, ed., *The Military Balance 2014*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, February 2014; CRS interview with editor, March 21, 2014.

⁴ See, inter alia, Hemmerdinger, Jon, "Additional A-10 retirements on hold until at least end of year," *FlightGlobal.com*, January 30, 2014, and U.S. Air Force, *Aircraft Procurement, Air Force, Justification Book Vol. 2-Mods*, Department of Defense Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 President's Budget Submission, Washington, DC, April 2013, p. 85.

⁵ For example, six A-10s were lost to enemy action in Operation Desert Storm, and nine others that returned to base with serious damage were reported beyond repair. One was known lost to enemy action in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

1986, the Air Force recommended ... replac(ing) the A-10s with modified F-16s (to be called A-16s) designed specifically to provide air support to the Army.⁶

Those replacement plans were not complete before the dissolution of the Soviet Union changed the expected requirement for close air support and the air defense environment in which the A-10 was expected to operate.

That strategic change had two contrary effects on the A-10. Eliminating the most stringent air defense scenario reduced the impetus to seek replacements for the A-10, as no other existing or projected air defense environment posed similar hazards to its operation. Conversely, the A-10's principal reason for existence was to fight the masses of Soviet tanks expected to be part of a European land war, so the rationale for a large fleet of A-10s simultaneously disappeared.

Adjusting force levels to the revised threat, the Air Force maintained an A-10 fleet of 350-370 through the 1990s and 2000s. The reduction to that level was accomplished principally by retiring the earliest A-10A aircraft. Almost all of the A-10s sent to storage—more than 250 aircraft—were A-10As retired in 1991 and 1992. This was the major A-10 fleet reduction prior to the Air Force's current proposal.

Extensive A-10 operations in the first Gulf War (8,084 sorties by 132 aircraft⁷) drove many A-10s close to their projected 8,000-hour service lives. As plans called for them to continue in service until 2028,⁸ the Air Force began upgrade and life-extension programs to maintain the remaining A-10 fleet's viability. In 2003, the Air Force studied cutting back on the life-extension programs due to increasing cost.⁹ This was widely interpreted as a proposal to eliminate the A-10 fleet itself.¹⁰ However, retirement was ruled out and the upgrade and life-extension programs continued.¹¹

In 2007, the Air Force began a new program to replace the wings of 231 older A-10s.¹² Although not dispositive, the continued investment in upgrades appears to indicate the Air Force did not then plan to divest A-10s. The re-winging program was ended in FY2013 at 145 aircraft.¹³

Current Proposal

Although the Air Force projects a savings of \$3.7 billion over the next five years from retiring the A-10,¹⁴ the service has publicly stated that it would prefer not to retire them, but that budget

⁶ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Close Air Support: Status of the Air Force's Efforts to Replace the A-10 Aircraft*, NSIAD-88-211, September 1988, p. 8, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/150/146941.pdf>.

⁷ Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Gulf War Air Power Survey Summary Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Air Force, 1993), pp. 184, 199.

⁸ U.S. Air Force, *Aircraft Procurement, Air Force, Volume II*, Fiscal Years 2000/2001 Biennial Budget Estimates Committee Staff Procurement Backup Book, Washington, DC, February 1999, p. 140.

⁹ John A. Tirpak, "Close Air Support Criticisms," *Air Force*, August 2003.

¹⁰ See, inter alia, Robert Coram, "The Hog That Saves the Grunts," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2003. CRS interview with Lt Gen David Deptula, USAF (Ret.), April 2, 2014. Deptula was the Air Combat Command director of plans during this period and had previously planned the Desert Storm air campaign.

¹¹ Elaine M. Grossman, "Air Leaders: A-10 Upgrades May Be Cut But Retirement Not Accelerated," *Inside the Air Force*, June 5, 2003. U.S. Air Force, *A-10 Upgrades Double Operational Lifespan*, June 30, 2004.

¹² U.S. Air Force, *Aircraft Procurement, Air Force, Volume I*, FY 2010 Budget Estimates Committee Staff Procurement Backup Book, Washington, DC, February 2009, p. 159.

¹³ U.S. Air Force, *Aircraft Procurement, Air Force, Justification Book Volume II*, Department of Defense Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 President's Budget Submission, Washington, DC, February 2012, p. 117.

¹⁴ Air Force communication to CRS, April 9, 2014; U.S. Congress, House Committee on Appropriations,

considerations compel the service to increase efficiencies and that a number of other platforms are capable of carrying out the close air support mission, as current operations show (see **Table 1.**)

“We’re looking for every option for where you can cut money, every modernization/recapitalization program,” [Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark] Welsh said. “If we have multiple-mission airplanes that can do the mission – maybe not as well, but reasonably well – you would look at eliminating the single-mission platform.”¹⁵

Table 1. Close Air Support Missions in Iraq and Afghanistan (2006 - October 2013)

Aircraft	% of sorties
A-10	19
F-16	33
F-15E	12
B-1B	8
All other U.S. fixed wing	28

Source: Air Force communication to CRS, April 9, 2014.

Opponents of the Air Force proposal cite the A-10’s unique attributes in close air support, noting that it is the only aircraft in the Air Force designed specifically for this mission. The Air Force agrees, but proposes to do close air support differently in the future to take advantage of new technologies; further, they point out that other Air Force aircraft used for close air support exceed the A-10 in some relevant attributes. For example, long-range bombers surpass it in endurance and weapon load, while UAVs are superior in endurance and pilot survivability.

In addition to the issue of combat effectiveness, the Air Force subsequently argued that because of end strength reductions, without retiring the A-10s, the service would not have enough maintenance personnel to field the new F-35 strike fighter on schedule.

FY2015 Legislation

In markup, three of the four defense committees acted to deny the Air Force’s retirement request in FY2015, and one endorsed the Administration’s request.

Authorization

As passed by the Senate, S. 2410, the Carl Levin National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, would prevent using any funds during FY2015 to retire, prepare to retire, or place in storage any A-10 aircraft. It also recommended increasing Air Force operations and maintenance by \$256.5 million and military personnel accounts by \$82.8 million to support A-10 operations.

As passed by the House, H.R. 4435, the Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, would prohibit funds to be obligated or expended to retire A-10s, and would require the Comptroller General of the United States to conduct a study

Subcommittee on Defense, *President Obama’s Proposed Fiscal 2015 Budget Request for the Air Force*, 113th Cong., 2nd sess., March 26, 2014.

¹⁵ Richard Sisk, “Air Force Mourns Likely Passing of A-10 Warthog,” *DoDBuzz.com*, September 18, 2013.

evaluating the Air Force's close air support platforms. The House authorization did not add back funds to operate the A-10s.

As subsequently passed by both houses, Section 133 of H.R. 3979, the Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, prohibited using funds "to retire, prepare to retire, or place in storage any A-10 aircraft, except for such aircraft the Secretary of the Air Force, as of April 9, 2013, planned to retire." It allowed 36 A-10s to be moved from operational status to backup status (which requires less operations and maintenance funding) following an independent assessment by the Director of Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation of ways to provide manpower to support the fielding of F-35 aircraft.

Appropriations

The Senate Appropriations Committee report on H.R. 4870, S.Rept. 113-211, added \$325.7 million above the Administration request in various funding lines to support continued operation of the A-10.

As passed by the House, H.R. 4870, the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2015, neither provided additional funds to operate the A-10 nor included any provision affecting its proposed retirement. The House-passed bill did rescind \$45 million in previously appropriated A-10 funds.

H.R. 83, the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015, added \$337.1 million to continue A-10 operations in FY2015. The bill also included the following language at Section 8141:

None of the funds made available by this Act may be used to divest, retire, transfer, or place in storage, or prepare to divest, retire, transfer, or place in storage, any A-10 aircraft, or to disestablish any units of the active or reserve component associated with such aircraft.

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